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ABSTRACT

The effects of two cover letter manipulations and their interactions with demographic variables on response to the initial mailing of a survey were investigated. The two manipulations, type of appeal and type of respondent group identification, were intended to affect respondents' perceptions of their social responsibility and position. In all, 599 replies were received from male (28 percent) and female (72 percent) teachers. Seventy-three percent were Anglo, with the remainder largely Hispanic. The appeal manipulation was appeal to the respondent's professional expertise or appeal to affiliation with a sample of teachers. No simple effects of either cover letter was found, although an interactive effect was found. Effects of gender and ethnicity on response rate were significant, with higher response rates for females and Anglos. Three tables present study data. An appendix lists the appeals made. (SLD)

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THE EFFECTS OF TWO TYPES OF APPEAL ON SURVEY RESPONSE RATES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of two cover letter manipulations and their interactions with demographic variables on responses to the initial mailing of a survey. The two manipulations, type of appeal and type of respondent group identification, were intended to affect respondents' perceptions of their social responsibility and position. No simple effects of either cover letter manipulation were found, though an interactive effect was found. Effects of gender and ethnicity on response rate were significant, with higher response rates for females and for Anglos.

Response rate to a mail survey is crucial, and population generalization cannot be made with confidence if response rates are low. Even if the sample was originally random, low response rates may compromise the representativeness of the data obtained since the respondent group may differ systematically from nonrespondents. Thus much effort has been devoted to maximizing response rates. Although repeated follow-ups have been clearly shown to increase response rates (e.g., Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978), from a purely economic perspective, maximizing response to the initial mailing is of particular interest since both time and follow-up costs are reduced if people respond quickly. Unfortunately, investigation of the effects of social psychological variables on responses to an initial mailing is limited. Subsequently, it is not clear what factors contribute to maximizing responses. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of two survey cover letter manipulations and their interactions with demographic variables on response to the initial mailing of a survey. The two manipulations, type of appeal and type of respondent group identification, were intended to affect respondents' perceptions of their social responsibility and position.

The effects of varying cover letter appeals have been previously investigated, albeit not extensively, with contradictory results. The appeals used have emphasized the social utility of responses (utility), benefits to the sponsor (sponsor), or benefits to the respondent (user). A social utility appeal emphasizes the importance of the survey in the betterment of the general population versus its importance in aiding either the sender (sponsor) or the respondent (user). Social utility appeals have included phrases such as "contribute to understanding more about," "a scientific examination of how..." Sponsor appeals have been phrases as "Your opinions are very important to our successful completion ofthis study," "help us understand..." User appeals have been phrased as "It's important for you to express your opinion so that...", "you will be better served as a result of ..." Respondents in these studies have been from groups as diverse as nurses, presidents of Fortune 500 companies, life insurance salespeople, city planners, businessmen, university faculty, engineers, university alumni, and the general population. Study results have been mixed. Studies have found no significant effect of type of appeal (Childers, Pride, & Ferrell, 1980--2-3% difference; Linsky, 1965--.9% difference), a positive effect of social utility over sponsor appeal (Jones & Linda, 1978--4.7%); a negative effect of social utility versus sponsor and user appeals (Childers et al., 1980--10-11%; Tyagi, 1989--21.4%); a positive effect of user over sponsor appeal (Champion & Sear, 1969--3.6%; Jones & Linda, 1978--4.7%); a negative effect of user over sponsor appeal (Kerin & Harvey, 1976); an interactive effect of appeal and sponsoring organization with higher returns for a user appeal from a

commercial organization and higher returns for a sponsor appeal from a university (Houston & Nevin, 1977); an interaction of appeal type with anonymity and feedback (Tyagi, 1989); and no interactive effects of appeal, sponsor, and postage (Houston & Nevin, 1977) or of appeal and presentation (handwritten versus typed) (Childers et al., 1980). The strongest effects of appeal were found in the Childers et al. (1980) and Tyagi (1989) studies. In the Childers et al. study, appeal effects were found for a sample of 700 business academicians but no effects of the same treatments for a sample of 1,000 business practitioners.

Sletto (1940) used a somewhat different cover letter manipulation. Three different letters that emphasized helping others, helping education as an enterprise, and challenging the recipient to do something that "can't be done" were sent to 300 university alumni. The altruistic appeal yielded the highest response rate (67%) compared to 64 and 60% for the other two types of letters but differences were not significant. The author argues this lack of significance was due to the small sample size. Hendricks et al. (1972) manipulated enhancement of the respondent and/or of the sponsor, which they termed ingratiation. They found the only significant effect to be a depressed return rate for the interaction of respondent and sponsor ingratiation in a high effort condition (7-page questionnaire vs. 1-page). They found that no flattery or too much flattery (respondent plus sponsor ingratiation) lowered returns when time required for survey completion was higher. The authors suggested the existence of an implicit norm for polite pleading.

Jones and Linda (1978) suggested that differences in results across studies may be due to the use of nonstandard appeals and also to population differences. Salience of the survey may also play a part.

Heberlein and Baumgartner pointed out in a 1978 review paper that mail survey research is notably atheoretical. This statement applies to the research on the effects of appeals. But, two potential theoretical bases exist for research on appeals. One is in the development of the relationship between attitude and behavior. Responding to a survey is a behavior, and as such, may be predicted just as other behaviors are. Ajzen and Fishbein (1980) suggested that variables that affect either attitude or the expectations the person perceives others to hold about the behavior affect the behavior. McKillip (1984) stated that "Techniques that identify the recipient personally or in terms of some group will make the expectations and norms of the culture or of the particular reference group more salient" (p. 81). Thus, framing an appeal so that it reinforces a culturally-approved norm should affect response rate.

A second theoretical base is in the construct of egoism, specifically pseudoaltruism. Egoism is defined as a motivational state with the ultimate goal of increasing one's own welfare (Batson, 1991). Pseudoaltruism is a special form of egoistic motivation in which rewards are internal rather than external

(e.g., reduced guilt, enhanced self-concept). Pseudoaltruistic behavior is motivated by personal norms, situation-specific expectations stemming from internalized values, with self-administered rewards and sanctions. What is termed pseudoaltruism by Batson (1991) was called altruism by Schwartz and his associates (1977, 1982). Staub (1978) described this pseudoaltruistic behavior as prosocial acts that appear to be intended to benefit others but which are associated with internal rewards if not with material or social gain. Aronfreed (1970) argued that action for internal gain should not be viewed as a form of social exchange, stating that the concept of altriusm is more useful in this circumstance. Response to a mail survey, in the absence of material incentives, could be viewed as altruistic or pseudoaltruistic behavior. Social utility and sponsor appeals are direct requests for such pseudoaltruistic behavior; user appeals are more closely tied to personal material or social gain. The literature suggests the possibility that characteristics of the sample may affect the likelihood of such responses. Eisenberg et al. (1989) found several interesting predictors of a measure of helping. For women, ascription of responsibility correlated with helping ($r = .40$) along with empathy ($r = .38$). For men, social responsibility correlated with helping ($r = .35$) as did empathic concern ($r = .37$). Results of this and other studies suggest the possibility that gender or other personological variables, be they inherited or societally prescribed, correlate with pseudoaltruistic behavior. Other researchers (e.g., Schwartz, 1977) have argued that the impact of personality depends upon the situational context and the behavior required; that personally held norms influencing response may not be consistently related to any personality measures. However, Eisenberg et al.'s (1989) results suggest that variables such as gender may affect behavior, in this case initial response to the survey.

This study sought to assess the effects on response rate of user and social utility appeals in combination with emphasis on either the respondents' professional expertise or affiliation with a sample of teachers (2x2 design). The appeal manipulation is similar to that used in previous research, but applied with a group of teachers. The manipulation of group identification or emphasis was intended to create an authority or affiliation perspective on the part of respondents. It was hypothesized that a user appeal would yield more responses for this group of teachers than a social utility appeal and that emphasis on authority versus affiliation would interact with gender. Males would stereotypically be thought to respond more positively to an appeal to authority and females to an appeal for affiliation or support. Also examined were the interactions of these manipulations with demographic characteristics in addition to gender (ethnicity, community size, and grade level taught). The appeals used are presented in Appendix A.

METHOD

Subjects.

The 1500 survey participants were randomly selected from a State Department of Education file containing names and addresses of all licensed teachers in public schools in New Mexico during the fall of 1991. Only personnel who were in teaching positions (regular education and special education) were included in the sample. Responses were received from 607 people (40.7%). Five respondents removed the code number from their questionnaire and so could not be used in this study; an additional three persons had incorrectly entered code numbers and these cases could not be matched with the demographic data file leaving a sample of 1492 cases and 599 respondents.

Males accounted for 28% of the total sample and females 72%. The proportion of male teachers statewide in 1991-92 was 26.9% and females 73.1%. Anglos accounted for 73% of the sample with 24% Hispanic, and 3% African-American, Asian, or American Indian. The proportion of Anglo teachers statewide for 1991-92 was 72.7% with 24.1% Hispanic.

Elementary level teachers comprised 53% of the sample with 15% middle school, 6% junior high, and 24% high school. The four cases who reported they were special education teachers were dropped from the analysis for level taught (n=1488). Community size was determined from U.S. Bureau of the Census information and was based on school zip codes. Small town was the most frequent school location (31%) with 29% from mid-sized cities, 17% from rural areas, 13% from large towns, and 10% from fringe areas for mid-sized cities.

Instruments. The survey addressed teachers' attitudes toward assessment. It contained 47 multi-part questions (approximately 105 responses, depending upon content areas taught) presented on 4 two-sided pages or 8 one-sided pages. Items were primarily closed-response with only two questions requiring brief written-in responses. A cover letter was included with each survey. Four versions of the cover letter that corresponded to the four appeals were written and one was included with each survey.

Procedure. Based on random number assignment, participants were sent one of four appeal letters with their surveys. Surveys were mailed to teachers from the State Department of Education April 22-23, 1992. Responses were accepted until July 6, 1992. There were no follow-up mailings.

Data were analyzed using a logit model (Kennedy, 1992) to assess the effects of appeal (utility and user), emphasis (authority and affiliation), gender, ethnicity (Anglo and Hispanic), community size (5 levels), and grade level taught (elementary, middle, high school) on responses. Two logit analyses were conducted, however, since inclusion of all variables simultaneously resulted in numerous cells with no cases. The first analysis included the variables appeal, emphasis, ethnicity, and gender. Only Anglos and Hispanics were included; there were too few African-Americans, American Indians,

or Asian-Americans to provide a meaningful analysis for these groups. The second analysis included appeal, emphasis, community size, and grade level taught. Likelihood ratio chi-square values were used as the test statistics and Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC) was calculated for model comparisons (Agresti, 1990). Yule's Q was calculated to express association values for categorical variables (2x2 tables only). Yule's Q may be interpreted in the same manner as a Pearson correlation coefficient.

RESULTS

In the first analysis, the null logit model did not fit the data ($L^2 = 32.92$, d.f. = 15, $p<.005$). The most parsimonious fitting model included all terms in the null logit model (all main marginals and all fixed-term interactions) plus the effects of gender and ethnicity on response ($L^2 = 9.97$, d.f. = 13, $p>.69$). While significant effects of gender and ethnicity on response were found, there were no significant effects of appeal. The appeal by emphasis by ethnicity effect was significant at the .10 level (partial $L^2 = 2.92$, $p<.09$) although a model without this term demonstrated adequate fit. When this interaction term was added to the model, fit improved ($L^2 = 2.67$, d.f. = 7, $p>.91$). The AIC was calculated for the simpler and more complex fitting models. The AIC value was lower for the model including the complex interaction term, indicating that the more complex model provides a better explanation of the data. Table 1 presents the frequencies and proportions of respondents and nonrespondents for appeal, emphasis, gender, and ethnicity. Females responded at a 7.8% higher rate than males. Table 1 includes an "other" category for ethnicity even though these cases were not included in the logit analysis. Anglos had the highest response rates (12.1% higher than Hispanics). Table 2 presents partial and marginal L^2 values for all terms in the model. Table 3 presents similar information for the interaction term. An authority appeal was slightly more effective than an affiliation appeal for Anglos under both user and social utility conditions; an authority appeal was more effective for Hispanics under a social utility appeal but less effective with a user appeal. Yule's Q values are clearly different for the Anglo and Hispanic samples.

In the second analysis, the null logit model provided adequate fit to the data ($L^2 = 46.19$, d.f. = 59, $p>.88$). Thus no significant effects of community size, level taught, appeal, or emphasis on response were found and no interactive effects (although the community size term had a partial chi-square--$L^2 = 9.46$, $p<.06$--significant at the .10 level). In this analysis, cell sizes were a concern since of 120 cells, 29 had cell frequencies less than 5. The community size categories of mid-sized city and fringe for mid-sized city were collapsed and the analysis rerun. Again, the null logit model provided good fit to the data. Table 2 presents respondent and nonrespondent information by the original community size variable. The lowest

response rates were from schools in mid-sized cities and rural areas.

DISCUSSION

The nature of the appeal produced no significant main effect on response rates in this study for this sample of teachers. This result agrees with that Childers et al. (1980) and Linsky (1965) found for samples of business practitioners and nurses. There also was no significant main effect of emphasis, suggesting that authoritative versus affiliative appeals made little difference overall. There was, however, an interaction term suggesting that appeal and emphasis had a differential effect for Anglos and Hispanics, authority working best for Anglos under both user and social utility conditions while affiliation worked better for Hispanics under the user appeal. This result suggests that effects of appeal and emphasis, if these manipulations do indeed actuate cultural norms, are dependent upon the culture of the audience. This finding is supported by the result of significant differences in response rates for different ethnic groups (about 1/3 for Hispanics but close to 1/2 for Anglos). Diverse tactics may be required to encourage responses from culturally diverse groups. If surveys are to capture a large proportion of the audience in non-Anglo groups, special attention needs to be given to understanding the general culture of that audience and in designing instruments that encourage response from groups who may use the English language somewhat differently than Anglos and who may have differing beliefs. In accord with McKillip (1984), framing appeals to reinforce culturally-approved and culturally-salient norms may produce the most positive effects.

Females responded at a higher rate than males. This result is in contrast to that of Green and Kvidahl (1989) who found no gender effect and that of Green and Stager (1986) who found males to respond at a higher rate to a first mailing. The New Mexico sample was more ethnically diverse than the Green and Stager sample but both were drawn from Western, primarily rural-small town areas.

The effects that were found were small (Yule's Q values of .16 to .24). Two explanations of the small size of the effects are, first, that survey recipients may not have even read the cover letter and, second, that the cover letter wording was not sufficiently strong. Effects found in previous research have generally been small as well.

It is suggested that careful attention be paid to the cover letter but that further investigation is needed to ascertain the most appropriate appeal for use with different populations. For example, subsequent research could extend the present study to include different survey sponsors, with more explicit tailoring of the appeal for different ethnic, and possibly socio-economic groups. An extension of this study to populations of businesspersons and general consumers is also needed. Effects of

social utility and user appeals may differ if a nonacademic group is surveyed by a nonacademic organization. Consistency of the nature of the sponsoring organization, the type of appeal, and audience may be more important in encouraging responses than any one factor alone. That is, a social utility appeal may work better if an academic/nonprofit organization sponsors a survey of an academic sample while a user appeal may be more effective with a consumer group survey sponsored by a for-profit company. The notion of appeals for pseudoaltruistic behavior may be of secondary importance in contrast to establishing consistency of method and credibility of the sponsoring organization in conducting that survey.

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Table 1

Frequencies and Proportions of Respondents and Nonrespondents by Appeal, Emphasis, Gender, Ethnicity, and Location

Variable		Responded n	Responded %	Failed to Respond n	Failed to Respond %
Appeal:	User	346	46.1	404	53.9
	Social Utility	353	47.1	397	52.9
	LR Chi-square = .13, p>.71; Q = .02				
Emphasis:	Support	341	45.5	409	54.5
	Authority	358	47.7	392	57.3
	LR Chi-square = .77, p>.37; Q = .05				
Gender:	Male	174	41.0	251	59.0
	Female	525	48.8	550	51.2
	LR Chi-square = 7.67, p<.01; Q = .16				
Ethnicity:	Anglo	546	49.9	549	50.1
	Hispanic	135	37.8	222	62.2
	(Other	18	37.5	30	62.5)
	LR Chi-square = 17.52, p<.001; Q = .24				
Location:	Mid-sized city	182	41.4	258	58.6
	Fringe--mid-sized city	73	50.0	73	50.0
	Large town	93	49.2	96	50.8
	Small town	237	50.5	232	49.5
	Rural	114	44.5	142	55.5
	LR Chi-square = 9.42, p<.06				

Table 2

Partial and Marginal Associations for Logit Model Effects

Effect	Partial L^2	Partial p	Marginal L^2	Marginal p
Appeal	0.00	.96		
Emphasis	0.00	.96		
Gender	284.88	.01		
Ethnicity	388.47	.01		
Response	5.52	.02		
Appeal x Emphasis	0.01	.93	0.01	.92
Appeal x Gender	1.49	.22	1.42	.23
Appeal x Ethnicity	1.19	.28	.99	.32
Appeal x Response	.11	.74	.10	.75
Emphasis x Gender	.36	.55	.25	.62
Emphasis x Ethnicity	.18	.67	.26	.61
Emphasis x Response	1.30	.25	1.32	.25
Gender x Ethnicity	3.31	.07	4.27	.04
Gender x Response	7.55	.01	8.63	.01
Ethnicity x Response	14.27	.01	15.42	.01
Appeal x Emphasis x Gender	2.09	.15	2.16	.14
Appeal x Emphasis x Ethnicity	.42	.52	.55	.46
Appeal x Gender x Ethnicity	3.61	.06	3.73	.06
Emphasis x Gender x Ethnicity	2.61	.14	1.89	.17
Appeal x Emphasis x Response	.36	.55	.21	.64
Appeal x Gender x Response	.05	.82	.12	.73
Appeal x Ethnicity x Response	1.57	.21	1.34	.25
Emphasis x Gender x Response	2.08	.15	1.83	.18
Emphasis x Ethnicity x Response	.33	.57	.32	.57
Gender x Ethnicity x Response	.34	.56	.52	.47
Appeal x Emphasis x Gender x Ethnicity	.41	.52	.31	.58
Appeal x Emphasis x Gender x Response	.08	.78	.13	.72
Appeal x Emphasis x Ethnicity x Response	2.92	.09	3.08	.08
Appeal x Gender x Ethnicity x Response	.30	.58	.15	.70
Emphasis x Gender x Ethnicity x Response	.01	.92	.08	.78
Appeal x Emphasis x Gender x Ethnicity x Response	.16	.69		

Note. All effects have 1 degree of freedom.

Table 3

Appeal by Emphasis by Ethnicity Effect on Response Rate

	Anglo				Hispanic			
	Response		Nonresponse		Response		Nonresponse	
Condition	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
User:								
Authority	144	50.9	139	49.1	28	35.0	52	65.0
Affiliation	125	46.0	147	54.0	40	44.4	50	55.6
		Q = .10				Q = -.20		
Social Utility:								
Authority	141	52.6	127	47.4	38	40.4	56	59.6
Affiliation	136	50.0	136	50.0	29	31.2	64	68.8
		Q = .05				Q = +.20		

Appendix A

User Appeal, Authority

As a professional in education, we ask that you contribute your expertise to an appraisal of assessment proficiencies and directions for New Mexico...To this end, a questionnaire has been designed to help us gather information about your interests and perceptions. You can expect to be better understood and served as a result of this study....Your ideas are valuable to us.

User Appeal, Affiliation

As a fellow educator, we ask that you join with other New Mexico teachers in an appraisal of assessment proficiencies and directions for New Mexico...To this end, a questionnaire has been designed to help us gather information about your interests and opinions. You can expect to be better understood and served as a result of this study....Your opinions are valuable to us.

Social Utility Appeal, Authority

As a professional in education, we ask that you contribute your expertise to an appraisal of assessment proficiencies and directions for New Mexico...To date, there has not been a scientific examination of current teacher assessment practices and opinions about those practices. We ask that you contribute to this important area of inquiry. Your responses are important in providing an accurate picture of current and ideal practice...Your ideas are valuable to us.

Social Utility Appeal, Affiliation

As a fellow educator, we ask that you join with other New Mexico teachers in an appraisal of assessment proficiencies and directions for New Mexico...To date, there has not been a scientific examination of current teacher assessment practices and opinions about those practices. We ask that you contribute to this important area of inquiry...Your opinions are valuable to us.